

# Queen Bess



**Bessie Coleman**

Today, at any given time, there are thousands of planes in the sky. Air travel is so common that we almost never stop to think about it. However, this wasn't always the case. Over the years many brave people have risked their lives to make the dream of flying come true.

You probably know that the Wright Brothers built the first airplane that actually flew. Charles Lindbergh was the first man to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Amelia Earhart was the first woman to fly across both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.

Those people are American heroes. But there is another pioneer in flying. She is not as well known, but her story is also very important. Her name is Bessie Coleman, and she was the first African-American pilot.

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas, in 1892. She had a hard childhood. Her parents were poor. They did not earn much money working in the fields. Bessie loved school, especially mathematics, but she could not attend school as often as she wished. As one of 13 children, Bessie often had to take care of her younger brothers and sisters. And during the cotton-picking season, the local school closed so that children could help their parents work in the fields. Still, Bessie did very well in her classes. She vowed that one day she would go to college.

That dream came true in 1910 when Bessie enrolled at a local college. Unfortunately, after less than a year, she ran out of money and had to go back to work. Bessie then moved to Chicago where her brother John was living.

John had been a soldier in France during World War I. One day, he mentioned to Bessie that in France there were women pilots.

"That's it!" Bessie cried excitedly. "You just called it for me!"

In that instant Bessie decided what she was going to do with her life. She always felt she would be somebody special. Now she knew why. She was going to be the first African-American woman pilot.

Bessie Coleman faced many challenges. First she had to find someone who would teach her how to fly. She applied to one flying school after another, but they all refused to admit her. Finally, Bessie turned for help to Robert S. Abbott, the editor of the *Defender*, one of Chicago's African-American newspapers.

When Abbott suggested that Bessie go to France, she immediately began to learn French. Abbott saw how determined Bessie was to become a pilot, and he made up his mind to assist her. He helped Bessie find a flying school in France. He even gave her the money to attend. That was all the help Bessie needed to follow her dream.

**Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5**  
**LA.A.2.2.1 Main Idea/Details Form A**

In France Bessie learned how to fly. In those days pilots were exposed to the open air. The plane's engines made a deafening noise, and the wind howled fiercely. Pilots had to wear scarves and leather gloves to keep from freezing. But Bessie loved flying. She once said, "You have never lived until you have flown."

On June 15, 1921, after only seven months in flight school, Bessie received her pilot's license. She became the first African-American woman pilot in history.

When Bessie returned to the United States in 1921, she found herself surrounded by reporters. They were anxious to write her story. Bessie had suddenly become famous! But she still faced a serious problem – how to earn a living as a pilot. Bessie decided to work as a stunt pilot – a pilot who entertains audiences by performing dangerous tricks in a plane.

In October 1922 Bessie put on her first show at an airfield in Chicago. The excited crowd watched as Bessie did thrilling loops and "figure-eights." She sometimes flew her plane so low that it nearly touched the ground. Before long Bessie was known as "Queen Bess." She soon became one of the most famous pilots in the world.



But Bessie Coleman still had one more dream. It was to start her own flying school. She hoped to train other young African-Americans who wanted to become pilots. To raise money for the school, Bessie performed many air shows. She gave lectures in schools around the country. She also encouraged young people to think about careers in aviation.

On April 28, 1926, Bessie went to Jacksonville, Florida, to perform in an air show. The day before the show at Paxton Field in Jacksonville, she asked a young pilot to take her up in his plane. She wanted to study the field and prepare for the show.

Bessie was not wearing her seat belt because she wanted to lean out of the plane to look down at the field. At 3,500 feet the plane suddenly started to fall. After a terrifying few seconds, it flipped over. Bessie was thrown from the plane. She plunged more than 500 feet to her death.

On May 5, 1926, more than 10,000 people attended Bessie Coleman's funeral in Chicago. Among them were many children who had heard Bessie speak at their schools.

In 1977, more than 50 years after Bessie's death, a group of African-American women pilots established the Bessie Coleman Aviators Club. The club is open to women pilots of all races.

Every year on April 28, the date on which Bessie Coleman died, the members of the club fly over the cemetery where Bessie is buried. They drop flowers on her grave. The pilots are showing their respect for "Queen Bess," a woman who encouraged so many others to follow their dreams.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5</b> <b>LA.A.2.2.1 Main Idea/Details Form A</b></p>
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**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Read the passage “Queen Bess”, then circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. How did Bessie make a living as a pilot?
  - A. She taught young pilots at air shows.
  - B. She raised money to start her own flying school.
  - C. She became the first African-American woman pilot.
  - D. She became a pilot that entertains audiences.
  
2. What was the FIRST challenge Bessie faced in becoming a pilot?
  - A. enrolling in college
  - B. finding an instructor
  - C. learning to speak French
  - D. getting the money for flying school
  
3. What is the main idea of this article?
  - A. Bessie Coleman followed her dreams to become a pilot.
  - B. Bessie Coleman had a hard childhood and was very poor.
  - C. Bessie Coleman did not know how to earn a living as a pilot.
  - D. Bessie Coleman performed dangerous trick which led to her death.
  
4. If the article “Queen Bess” needed a new title, which would be BEST?
  - A. “Great African-American Pilots”
  - B. “The Dangers of Flying in the Early Days”
  - C. “How Flying Has Changed Over the Years”
  - D. “Bessie Coleman - the First African-American Pilot”
  
5. What happens AFTER Bessie puts on her first air show but BEFORE her funeral in Chicago?
  - A. Reporters want to write her story.
  - B. Bessie starts her own flying school.
  - C. Bessie becomes known as “Queen Bess”.
  - D. The Bessie Coleman Aviators Club is established.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reading Mini-Assessment Grade 5</b> <b>LA.A.2.2.1 Main Idea/Details Form A</b></p>
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**Answer Key – Queen Bess**

LA.A.2.2.1: The student identifies the following from a passage: main idea or essential message, relevant supporting details and facts, and/or chronological order or other sequence of events.

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